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Chapter 7

Women Heroes, Goddesses and Politics of Image Making

There was once a Dalit king in the Pratapgarh Zila. The king was a *Chakravarty* (king of a very large territory). His glory used to be sung all over the land. He was just and kind and everybody had work, food and clothes. The king had all the qualities necessary in a good king and, under his supervision, the moral code used to be followed. The king had a minister who was a Thakur. He was a great conspirator. The king was intelligent but not a good strategist. The minister conspired against the king, removed him from the throne and usurped the throne for himself instead. He also banished the king, who took shelter in a forest.

Today's modern-day kings are the descendants of the conspiring minister and we are the descendants of the Dalit king who was exiled to the forest.

'Dalit Samrajya,' A Nautanki composed by
Babulal Bhanwra, a member of the Jagriti Dasta, BSP

On 29 September 1998, a rally was organized by the BSP at the Hazrat Mahal Park grounds in Lucknow. The centre of attraction was Mayawati. While delivering her speech, all the supporters who had come to attend the rally gave her their undivided attention. The crowd was focused entirely on her, forgetting their hunger, thirst and the discomfort of sitting in the sun. The women at the rally had come only to get a glimpse of Mayawati. They shoved and pushed to get close to her and feel her aura.[1] A large number of cassette shops had also been set up at the park, housed in makeshift stalls. Their owners were BSP supporters who had come from different parts of the state. The most popular cassettes were of songs about the Buddha, Dr Ambedkar and Dalit women icons like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Avantibai, Pannadhai and Mahaviri Bhangin, set to the tunes of popular Hindi film songs and to the folk metres of

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Figure 7.1
A statue of Jhalkaribai in Jhansi

Doha, *Chaupai*, *Kajari* and *Biraha*. Posters, photographs, badges, lockets and other accessories with the images of these icons were also being distributed among the people. Popular booklets containing speeches of Dr Ambedkar and the life stories of Dalit heroes were also being sold from temporary stalls set up along the perimeters of the park.

As part of the rally, a folk singer sang a paeon in the glory of Dalit heroes. Before beginning his songs, the singer gave an introductory speech to the audience which was as follows:

> The history of us Dalits has been one of pride and glory. We were once kings of large kingdoms, and had a lot of power. Many saints and wise men were born into our castes. Dalit brothers, because of the *Manuvadi* (followers of the Manu Samhita) conspiracy of the upper castes, we are in this terribly degraded condition today. Many chivalrous kings were born in our communities who got the better of their enemies. Many of our brave soldiers chopped British soldiers into little pieces like vegetables. In the 1857 Revolt, brave Dalits like Udadevi, Jhalkaribai, Avantibai, Pannadhai, Mahaviridevi, and so on fought bravely to free their motherland from the clutches of the British and almost forced them to flee the country. They succeeded in staying on and ruling our country because the upper-caste kings and feudal landlords, as an outcome of their own vested interests, created the conditions for them to stay on. Today, our sister, Mayawati,

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has come as their incarnation to fight against anti-Dalits like Mulayam and other *Manuvadi*s. Dalit brothers, it is time to awake, arise and support her to capture the power that has been denied to us for so many centuries.

This folk singer was not merely a singer but also a member of the *Jagriti Dasta* (cultural squad) of the BSP, the activities of which have been described in the earlier chapters. If we analyse the discourse of the folk singer given above, it can be revealed to some extent that the Dalit attempt to inject into their consciousness the belief that they were the rulers, acts as a challenge to the authority of the upper castes. Also, by arousing their memories and iconizing their heroes of the 1857 Rebellion, they feel a sense of being part of the nation and assert their right to a share in it. And by projecting Mayawati as the incarnation of the Dalit women heroes, the party tries to reinforce her courage and her ability to challenge the hegemony of the upper-caste *Manuvadi*s. So while they try to make them believe in Mayawati's miraculous courage, they also try to enthuse them to become militant and fight against the oppression and exploitation that they have been suffering at the hands of the upper castes. Thus the ways in which identity history is used for achieving these purposes can be clearly seen. The multiple constructions given to these identity histories are meant to strengthen Dalit mobilization and empower them to assert themselves in the State-sponsored power discourse.

DALIT LOCATION AND THE NARRATIVE OF COURAGE

An example of how a marginalized caste picks up an icon and uses it to carve their identity history can be seen in the case of the Bhangis. Mahaviridevi has emerged as an important marker of the identity of the Bhangi community. It is interesting to know that with the growing needs of Dalit politics of the BSP, the narrative on her story was extended to the entire Dalit community. The popular narrative about Mahaviridevi, as documented by Dalit writer Dinkar (1990: 27), is that she was a saviour of the Dalits and was prepared to fight against even the rich and landed, if they infringed upon the rights of the Dalits. Although she lived a life of great penury, her motto in life, which she tried to inculcate among the women of her community, was to live with respect and die with respect.

Maharviridevi is popular in the Muzaffarnagar region of western UP. Plays based on her life are regularly performed and many folk poets

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have composed poems on her life. Popular folk singer Arjun Gayak of Agra sings:

Mahaviri Bhangin ke ganwa bhaiya gave ke pari
San sattavan ke gadar mein di usne kurbani
Angrezon ke samne usne haar kabhi na maani [2]

(Translated)

(Brother, you will have to sing the song of Mahaviri Bhangin
She sacrificed her life in the 1857 Rebellion
She never accepted defeat before the British.)

Deval Kavi, a poet born in Muzaffarnagar but settled in Agra, recites the following poem:

Chamak uthi san sattavan ki vah talwar purani
Mahaviri Bhangin thi bari mardani [3]

(Translated)

(The old sword of the 1857 Rebellion shone brightly
Mahaviri Bhangin was very masculine.)

Through such poems and songs, a popular image of Mahaviridevi Bhangin has been created in the minds of the people. The BSP has picked up the image and used it for the political mobilization of the Bhangis of that region and the Dalits as a whole all over UP. While using her myth to shape the public image of Mayawati, the BSP has used two ideas that are related to the Mahaviridevi myth, namely 'living and dying with respect' and 'saviour of Dalit community.' This is an example of the party's methods to create a semiology from the image of the past and transfer this symbolic power to the image of Mayawati.

When the Bhangis write their caste history they mention the name of Mahaviridevi in glowing terms. (B.S.R.S. Nath has written two books which document the Bhangi caste history (Nath 1998a, 1998b). In these books, he writes that not only were the men of the Bhangi caste ready to lay down their lives for the sake of their motherland, but the women too were equally courageous. Along with twenty-two other Bhangi

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women, the courageous Mahaviridevi became a martyr while fighting against the British. Living up to her name which means 'brave,' Mahaviridevi was fearless. She stood up against the British soliders and fought them undaunted.

The Bhangis, the community to which Mahaviridevi belonged, is among the lowest untouchable castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy. They have been associated with scavenging and sweeping and even today a good number of them serve as sweepers in public and private establishments. They are widely distributed in UP, Haryana, Punjab, Delhi and Chandigarh. Their total population in UP, according to the 1981 census, is 744,821. They are predominantly found in the rural areas, but a good number of them—271,801 persons (36.4 percent of their total population)—have returned from the urban areas. They are known to be non-vegetarian and to occasionally consume alcoholic drinks. The Bhangis recognize themselves as Shudras and they observe Hindu rituals on birth, marriage, death and other social occasions (Singh 1993: 107). Their caste name has been derived from the Sanskrit word *bhangi* which means hemp. It seems to be an allusion to the caste members' drinking habits, since the Bhangis are very fond of drinking *bhang*, a country liquour. The Bhangis were described as a representative of the *Chandala* of Manu, who is said to have come out of the union of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman. The Bhangis were traditionally associated with the tasks of scavenging, sweeping, basket-making and so on. They were brought into urban areas in the colonial period to perform the first two roles and they gradually became an urban community. But with the widespread use of septic latrines and other modes of public conveniences, the practice of carrying night soil has perceptibly declined now in many parts of urban India. The National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their Dependents (1991–92) seeks to liberate the Bhangis from their existing 'hereditary, obnoxious and inhuman occupation of manually removing night soil and filth' and to provide for and engage them in 'alternative and dignified occupations' over a period of five years (Annual Report 1991–92, Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi). The Bhangis are now slowly taking to other occupations. Literacy and education are both slowly increasing within this community. Their literacy rate according to the 1981 Census is 14.31 per cent (22.26 per cent males and 5.35 per cent females) (ibid.: 108).

Being an untouchable lower caste, the Bhangis have always been extremely deprived and marginalized by the upper castes in whose houses

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they used to work. Around 1923, the Arya Samaj began to conduct socio-religious reforms among the Bhangis, education being one of the areas of reform. After 1940, many Bhangi students began to enrol themselves in schools providing free education. The Marwar Lok Parishad, Marwar Mehtar Sudhar Sabha and later the Rajputana Mehtar Sudhar Sabha helped the Bhangis to further change their lifestyle. With the recent assertion of identity by marginalized Dalit communities, some of the Bhangi communities—the Bhangis, the Mehtars, the Lalbegis and other castes that were associated with scavenging in the past—are now coming together as one community, claiming a common descent from the legendary saint Balmiki, author of the most important Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. The story of their caste history has been documented in the book *Balmiki-Balmiki*, written by Badri Prasad Balmikanand, a Dalit social reformer, who worked for the uplift of the Bhangis by setting up a number of schools in UP (Balmikanand 1974: 26). According to the story, Saint Balmiki, with whom the Bhangis associate themselves, was not a Shudra or a lower caste. From the *Ramayana* we can glean that his father was Pracheta, which was another name of Lord Varun, the God of Wind. This implies Balmiki was a Brahmin. But Balmiki was a highly humane man, who did not believe in discriminating anyone on the basis of his caste. He preached love and compassion for all. It is also understood from the *Ramayana* that he had a group of 2,000 select followers whom he named Balmikis. The descendants of these followers are the Balmikis of today.

To explain their marginalized social, economic and cultural condition today the Balmikis assert that nearly 5,000 years ago when the Aryans invaded North India, their ancestors (Balmikis), who were the original settlers of those regions, were the rulers, and priests. These brave people put up a stiff resistance which led to gruesome fighting and bloodshed. The Aryans received a great setback in these battles but gradually regained their strength. In a bid to take revenge, they conspired to deplete the Balmikis of their power by dividing and fragmenting the large number of small Dalit communities so that they could not fight against the Aryans unitedly. The Brahminical Aryans exploitated and oppressed these Dalit castes. They refused to accept their saints and wise men and instead imposed the Brahminical Vedic diktats on them, declaring them as untouchables and outcastes. They forced the people of these castes to perform lowly activities. Gradually these castes fell into a deep mire of poverty and backwardness. Their glorious history was completely overshadowed. With time their condition only worsened. Even after so many

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centuries these castes have yet to recover from their pitiable condition (Nath 1998b: 5).

IDENTITY HISTORY AND DALIT MEANINGS

While narrating the history of their caste, the Bhangis proudly cite Mahaviridevi as a shining example of their caste glory. She epitomizes the chivalry, bravery and valour this caste was once famous for, but which was lost under Brahminical cultural dominance. The story of Mahaviridevi is popular in the oral tradition of the Bhangis settled around Saharanpur and the adjoining areas. Gradually, it emerged as the story of the entire Bhangi community of UP, especially in their print medium, and developed as an integral aspect of Dalit identity. The way the Dalits remember and narrate the story of Mahaviridevi is similar to the way in which Jhalkaribai and Udadevi are remembered. While highlighting the qualities of these three heroines, a point that is emphasized is the militancy displayed by these heroes, a militancy that can be witnessed in the number of British soldiers killed by them. It is often repeated that the three heroines formed their own all-women armies that fought bravely against the British. But one difference between the stories of Udadevi and Jhalkaribai and that of Mahaviridevi is that the former are shown to be close to two queens, Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Laxmibai respectively; but according to popular narrative, Mahaviridevi was close to the people rather than to any king or queen. Mahaviridevi's story may be seen as a form of protest at the grass-roots level. In popular images of Jhalkaribai and Udadevi printed in posters and pamphlets, Jhalkaribai is portrayed riding a horse like Rani Laxmibai while Udadevi is depicted as holding a gun and shooting down British soldiers. Mahaviridevi on the other hand is shown lying on the ground holding a sickle. Stories about Jhalkaribai show her to be more intelligent than Rani Laxmibai while those about Udadevi establish her as being more patriotic than Begum Hazrat Mahal, who belonged to the royal Nawab family. Mahaviridevi, on the other hand, is shown to have led a mass movement by mobilizing women at the grass-roots level to fight against the British. From the way the story of Mahaviridevi is narrated, it is clear that the Dalits would like to democratize the symbols of Dalit protest by driving home the idea that there were many brave persons among them. Jhalkaribai and Udadevi were individuals attached with queens and courts (*durbar*) whereas there could be many Mahaviridevis

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among the women who formed a part of her army. This might be an effort to glorify the mass leadership qualities among the Dalits which could be converted into people's power at the grass roots.

Through the history of identity, the marginalized Dalits attempt to portray four qualities that are supposed to be possessed only by upper-caste Kshatriya kings and rulers: regality (*rajatwa*), bravery (*viratwa*), wisdom (*gyan*) and leadership (*netritwa*). The tradition of writing caste histories, which started in the late 19th century among the upper castes of the Gangetic Valley, and which percolated down to the lower castes and Shudras, glorified the regality (*rajatwa)* and bravery (*viratwa)* of the concerned caste. These qualities are known as *kshatritwa* qualities since they are believed to be the qualities of the upper-caste Kshatriyas, the kingly, the landed, warrior caste. The narratives of the Dalits during this period thought of themselves not as cosmically created servants (*Shudra*) devoid of history but as the descendants of these divine warrior *Kshatriya* clans, firmly rooted in the Indian past (Pinch 1996: 6). Their narratives however did not borrow directly from the upper-caste narratives but were innovatively reconstructed to suit their own logic.

In the context of the Dalits, the feudal qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* were given a different interpretation. When feudal values prevailed in society these qualities were meant to highlight the masculine, aggressive qualities of the kings belonging to upper castes who were ruthless towards their enemies. They spent most of their time in the luxury of wine and women, whom they mercilessly abducted at their will. These are largely decadent values today, but the Dalits use them to highlight how they fought against the conspiracy of the upper-caste kings and the Mughals who wanted to capture their territories, and how they protected their women from the barbaric designs of the invaders. The underlying intention behind the narratives infused with these values is to inculcate the sense of power and chivalry within the oppressed and marginalized Dalit communities.

If we analyse narratives of feudal chivalry we find that they are based on cruel and merciless killings over the abduction of a beautiful woman or the appropriation of a piece of land, both of which were thought of as privately owned properties. But in the descriptions of the chivalry of Dalit kings, there were two main reasons for battles and killings. One was to ensure social justice, as in the case of the Mushahar heroes, Dina and Bhadri, in the regions of Darbhanga and Mithila. The other was to fight against upper-caste kings to protect their territories. A third reason was

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to defend their people in the feuds initiated by male relatives of upper-caste princesses who fell in love with lower-caste boys. This is what is believed to have happened in the case of Chuharmal, with whom the upper-caste Bhumihar princess, Reshma, had fallen in love. There was a bloody war between the two communities and Chuharmal, initially claimed as the hero of the Dusadhs, slowly emerged as a hero of the entire Dalit community. The memories around his narrative are used today by politicians to mobilize the lower caste communities living around Patna and Mokama (Narayan 2001b: 20).

The Pasis claim that they were the ruling community of the Awadh region in the 12th century. The narratives about their kings are filled with descriptions of their *rajatwa* and *viratwa* and their efforts to ensure social justice. The use of narratives that glorify the qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* is in fact a strategy adopted by Dalit writers and composers to inculcate self-confidence in the collective psyche of the community, and inject militancy and aggression into the oppressed and downtrodden Dalits of a multicultural and multi-community society in which many kinds of compititive interactions take place among various groups. This interplay of social tensions is reflected in the historical narratives but there are many compromises and negotiations.

WOMEN ICONS AND THE MAKING OF THE IMAGE OF MAYAWATI

In contemporary times, as Dalit narratives are being rewritten and recreated to awaken the oppressed Dalit communities, and with the dalit movement being spearheaded by a woman like Mayawati, the challenges of searching for and recreating icons is manifold. In the search for heroes on whom the image of Mayawati could be carved, women heroes like Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi were picked up. These heroines are sometimes referred to by their caste names—Jhalkaribai Korin, Udadevi Pasi and Mahaviridevi Bhangi—but often also without their caste names so as to include the whole Dalit community under these symbols. These heroines are linked with the image of Mayawati and the qualities of *rajatwa* and *viratwa* are bestowed on them as a narrative strategy to inculcate the qualities of aggression and militancy among the Dalits at the grass-roots level. Mayawati was then projected as their heir who would carry forward the legacy they laid behind in the mutiny of 1857. Building up on this theme, she was depicted as a brave and wise leader who is also highly patriotic, having devoted her life to the service of the nation.

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A preconceived notion prevalent among the upper castes is that lower castes are not in a position to rule because they do not possess the qualities that rulers and kings need. The upper castes believe that since the lower castes have always been menial workers serving them, they were not fit to rule or govern. The narrative constructions of the Dalits in which they take pains to highlight the qualities of *rajatwa* and the fact that they had been ruling communities for many centuries are meant to break this preconceived notion. In this process, they also want to support the candidature of Mayawati as an able ruler of the Dalits and also of the country. As narrated by Bhullar, a Chamar living in Shahabpur, the Mahants of the Kabir Math of Banaras, do not just preach religion, but also teach about the art of good governance (*Rajdharm*) and politics. They try to make the Dalits understand that Mayawati has all the qualities of a good ruler and so they should all support her. Mayawati is the heir to the legacy passed down by the benevolent, kind and just Dalit rulers who have ruled for many centuries.[4] She is portrayed as able and powerful, full of masculine qualities, yet very feminine. Mayawati herself, during public meetings with bureaucrats and government officials, always projects her leadership qualities by highlighting her masculine characteristics of aggression and arrogance. She tries hard to subvert the upper-caste notions of femininity and lady-like behaviour, which are associated with meekness, mildness, subservience, docility and a hierarchical form of address. Male officials and rival leaders are addressed as *tu* or *tum* (an impolite form of 'you') rather than the *aap* (which is a more respectful form of 'you'). Colloquial terms of address like *arrey* and *terrey*, used mainly by upper-caste men to address lower castes, appear frequently in her conversations and she uses abusive words and slangs. Words that connote inherent masculinity, violence and aggression, like *kuchalna* (crushing) and *ukharna* (plucking out from the roots) are also thrown into her conversations. For example, during a rally held in Lucknow on 19 September 1998, Mayawati warned the then chief minister, Kalyan Singh (of the BJP), that if he tried to carve the picture of a lotus (the symbol of the BJP) on the gateway of Ambedkar Park then the 'flower would be crushed' (*kuchal denge*). Also, if the statue of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, an icon of the BJP, were installed in the park, it would be 'uprooted' and 'planted' in Lakshman Park (another park in Lucknow).[5]

The image making of Mayawati is a fusion based on the symbolic use of icons related with the 1857 Rebellion, the Dalit rulers of the medieval period, the dissenting heroes of folklores from epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and social reformers like Ambedkar, Periyar and

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Shahuji Maharaj. This technique is markedly different from the image making of Indira Gandhi, another woman leader who emerged in North India and who made an indelible mark in the history of the country. The image making of Indira Gandhi was based on the latter part of the national movement which was dominated by Gandhi and Nehru. Her image is that of the daughter of a towering personality who played a yeoman role in securing India's freedom and who sacrificed everything for the sake of the nation. She is also believed to have been the heir to Gandhiji's political inheritance through her father, who was known to be very close to him. She was her father's close confidante and counsellor and also his official hostess who kept his house neat and beautiful by her innate feminine qualities. She effortlessly imbibed statecraft simply by being with her father and watching him at work (Malhotra 1989: 60). Her image building had all the scope available to women in the Hindu culture, since women in Hinduism have a dominating role as Durga, the savior (Wadley 1988: 23–43). Thus, Indira Gandhi's image in the psyche of the oppressed took the form of a Devi.

Another charismatic woman political leader of the 20th century is Jayalalithaa Jayaram. She was the leading heroine in Tamil cinema who entered the Tamil political scene under the patronage of M.G. Ramachandran, himself a charismatic filmstar-turned-politician of Tamil Nadu. Cinema had a strong role in evoking popular perception of Jayalalithaa, since the use of visual and ceremonial aids helped to form an association with a glorious past. The extravagant visual propaganda deployed by the All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) for the Eighth World Tamil Conference held in January 1995 in the city of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, is an illustrative example. The choice of Thanjavur as the location for the conference was appropriate, since the city's prominence is rooted in the most illustrious period of Tamil history, the Chola dynasty that ruled from the 9th century to the 11th. Thanjavur was the capital of the Chola empire and is the site of famous architectural wonders including the Brihadeesvara temple. Jayalalithaa appropriated the Tamil conference to establish her leadership status. In one hoarding, the Chola king, Rajaraja Chola, patron of the Brihadeesvara temple, points towards a portrait of Jayalalitaa whose head is encircled by a halo. In the background, sculptors and builders are shown constructing a temple. Jayalalithaa's image, in the left foreground, is much larger than that of the other figures. On the right, on a slightly depressed plane, is the image of the Chola king directing his queen's (and the viewers') attention to Jayalalithaa. At first sight, Jayalalithaa emerges as the direct successor of a politically powerful as

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well as a culturally accomplished ancient Tamil king. Another spectacular image displayed at the conference venue was a giant cut-out of Jayalalithaa in a brilliant blue cape and saree juxtaposed against the cut-out of a gold temple gateway (*gopuram*). The size of the human figure and the architectural representation are almost equal, in effect, causing Jayalalithaa to become synonymous with the gateway. In other words, Jayalalithaa is represented simultaneously as the protector of Tamil religion and tradition, as well as the gateway to the rich heritage of the Tamil race (Jacob 1997).

Jayalalithaa is projected as having both the qualities of masculinity and femininity. This is widely accepted by the people since, in Hindu philosophy, aggression and power are not the prerogative of males. In fact, action and power (*shakti*) are feminine principles which women are believed to possess far more than men. A woman who realizes her *shakti* is invincible and fearful and is likened to a goddess (*devi*). Hence, in the Hindu context, it is possible for a woman to act powerful and aggressive without being categorized as masculine. In the case of Jayalalithaa, the most important perception that she needed to evoke were the qualities of a heroine and a saviour of the people (Willner 1984). She encouraged a perception of herself as a maturing, compassionate, universal mother (*amma*), who is an authoritative power in the context of Hindu religion and culture.

While Indira Gandhi and Jayalalithaa were projected as *devi*, Mayawati's charismatic leadership was based on the Dalit hope for liberation from the centuries of oppression and humiliation. The people were made to believe that Mayawati could free them from this situation. So rather than being portrayed as a *devi*, she was portrayed as a courageous woman (*virangana*). While Jayalalithaa emerged as a Mother (*amma*) in Tamil Nadu, Mayawati was the 'sister' (*behenji*) who would spearhead the Dalit struggle for liberation. Significantly, the image of the *virangana* was also based on the past glory of Dalit kings and the Dalit role in the freedom movement. The image of Mayawati as the Iron Lady was created by Kanshi Ram and was then transmitted to the people as the Brave Iron Lady (*Lauh Virangana*), as has been mentioned in the introduction of this book. Her father used to refer to her as his 'tigress' daughter and proclaimed that he was very proud of her (*Mujhe apni sherni beti par naaz hai*) (Yad 2005b: 14). Thus, the metaphors that were used to portray Mayawati as a brave lady who would free the Dalits from oppression by higher and middle castes, gradually moulded her into a Goddess who would be the saviour of the Dalits. This portrayal has now been taken over

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